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# ABERRATIONS OF BEAUTY: VIOLENCE AND CINEMATIC RESISTANCE IN HANEKE'S *THE WHITE RIBBON*

JAMES S. WILLIAMS ARGUES THAT SOUNDTRACK AND EDITING  
COMPLICATE A NARRATIVE OF CRUELTY

*The White Ribbon* (2009) would appear to begin where Haneke's previous film, *Caché* (*Hidden*, 2005), left us: with the question of the potential of children to be either innocent and a force for future good, or guilty of collusion and set to replicate the sins of their fathers.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, *The White Ribbon* has been largely received as a parable about the effects of suppression, starting with brutal, ritualistic punishment in the home and extending to corruption within a rural, north German Protestant village on the eve of World War I. Eichwald is beset by mysterious and apparently random events, many violent, some lethal, all with a sadomasochistic undertow of revenge. The narrative voiceover (the first such instance in Haneke's cinema) encourages us from the outset to look for premonitions of National Socialism. What we are about to witness "may perhaps clarify some of the things that happened in this country," the elderly narrator (Ernst Jacobi) suggests. His disarming admission that what he is telling us may be based at times on rumor and hearsay is clearly meant to persuade us of his honorable intentions. Expressionless, seemingly detached, always earnest, he chatters on for 143 minutes in the full confidence that he will emerge remarkably well from this terrible tale. For in addition to his patient cataloguing of strange atrocities that he presents himself as actively trying to uncover and prevent, he pursues another more tender, lyrical, and personal narrative: that of his own presence in the village as a naïve and winsome thirty-one-year-old schoolteacher (Christian Friedel) and his shy courtship of the seventeen-year-old Eva (Leonie Benesch), new nanny for the local baron's children.

The exact identity of the perpetrator(s) is never revealed, although the cinematic frame is flush with the faces of young children and early teenagers roving around morosely in packs with the camera trained at their eye-level. It is implied that

they are retaliating against their hypocritical educators, who preach absolute ideals which they fail to live by themselves. Yet the mature narrator never spells this out, just as he chooses never to criticize or doubt his younger self. After having been shown the door by the pastor (Burghart Klaussner) for voicing suspicions about the latter's children, he briefly recalls at the end the outbreak of war, his conscription, marriage to Eva, taking on his father's business, and the fact that he never saw any of the villagers again. We will thus never know the reasons for the sudden disappearance of four key characters: the doctor (Rainer Bock), his daughter Anna (Roxane Duran), his son Rudi (Miljan Chatelain), the midwife (Susanne Lothar), and her young child Karli (Eddy Grah), a Down Syndrome sufferer. Likewise, the mystery of what one needs to repress in the past to account for where one is in the present (a question formalized by Haneke in an interview included on the DVD of *Caché*) is left unanswered. What actions, we may wonder, were committed by the narrator to ensure his own survival through two world wars up to the indeterminate present moment of his narration? On this specific point, along with the more general question of how individual moral discipline can lead ultimately to state fanaticism, he remains glaringly silent.

For all its thematic consistency with the rest of Haneke's oeuvre, *The White Ribbon* stands out on account of its exceptional display of the plastic qualities of the image. Shot in pellucid monochrome, the film dazzles in its exact and rigorous mise-en-scène, meticulous compositions, and immaculately crafted, crisp cinematography by Christian Berger. The gray shadings of interiors appear so finely etched that when the action passes from interior to exterior into a bright outdoor scene the contrast is almost blinding. Haneke has acknowledged the influence of the great German photographer August Sander who specialized during the 1910s and 20s in brilliantly sharp, unembellished human portraiture, part of an ethnographic project to construct a "people of the twentieth century" (the captions he supplied draw on family and

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Rituals of obedience and shame  
*The White Ribbon*. © Films du Losange. Courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics.

social types, as does Haneke's film). Moreover, in comparison with almost all Haneke's previous work, *The White Ribbon* has a strangely classical feel, compounded by what is, for him, a brisk and highly efficient narrative pace.

The opening image, for example, a fade-in to a fixed frame that immediately captures the first criminal event (the doctor's horse tripping over a hidden wire) is dispatched within less than half a minute, directly followed by a lateral tracking shot of the midwife set later in time. In addition, there are an unusual number of extreme close-ups of faces counterpointed by long shots of the village, as well as an almost compulsive use of tight shot/reverse shot for all extended dialogues. Also evident during moments of particular tension are instances of subjective point of view usually studiously avoided by Haneke. Further, in contrast to films like *Caché* and *Code Unknown* (2000), which are built from long, slow, unedited takes, and interstitial blackouts that serve to undermine sequence and temporality, the action here appears to proceed in strictly linear fashion, however elliptical. By means of clear, "dry" editing, a regular rhythm of inversion of images and extremes is established, most obviously from outside to inside (the film oscillates between grainy interiors and farmland exteriors) but also from movement to stasis, fire to snow, suicide to sordid sex, creating the effect of a collage of shots that intensifies the contrasting

blocks of color and shade and underlines the relentless cycle of violence.

It would be reasonable to assume that this distinctive style is another weapon in Haneke's armory of formal tricks used to manipulate the spectator. After all, most manifestations of beauty in his cinema are objects of suspicion and critique, from the clichéd tourist advert of a perfect Austria in *The Seventh Continent* (1989) to the repeated full-frame reproduction of a late Dürer watercolor imaging the apocalypse in *Time of the Wolf* (2003). *The Piano Teacher* (2001) links classical music to the themes of elitist culture, control, and repression in Vienna as they play out in the perverse behavior of the protagonist Erika. One of her favorite composers, on account of his being aware of "what it means to lose oneself before complete self-abandonment,"<sup>2</sup> is Franz Schubert, whose "Dried Roses" for flute and piano, rehearsed mechanically by the baroness (Ursina Laudi) and her son's tutor (Michael Kranz), provides one of the few musical distractions in *The White Ribbon* (the film possesses no soundtrack other than Lutheran hymns of moral subjugation like "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" and "Commit Thou All Thy Griefs," sung diegetically by the children's choir during the church scenes). The few wide-shot views of nature, such as the searingly beautiful images of pristine summer cornfields, are always mediated by the narrator's voiceover and should be

read as a form of pathetic fallacy, part of his nostalgic projection of the mood of young yearning and love. In an ironic nod to romantic Schubert clichés, the teacher first meets Eva after he has been fishing for trout.

It is through Schubert that *The White Ribbon* transports us back to Haneke's Austrian context with its still far from exorcized Nazi past and ongoing process of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* ("coming to terms with the past"). We could perhaps link the white ribbon of the title—ironic symbol of innocence and shame tied by the pastor to his children's arms—to the red-white-red pattern of the Austrian flag with its connotations of violence, religious faith, and purity. Similarly, the ordered fields of ripe wheat might be thought to invoke a fascist visual aesthetic of the utopian agrarian idyll, as well as the nostalgic Heimat films popular in post-war Germany and Austria with their simple narratives of rural life. Yet Haneke is also working at a more subtle and universal level than this by exploring the potential of cinematic form to convey the capacity for resistance in human and historical experience.

### FROM TABLEAU TO ECHO CHAMBER

There is something peculiarly haunted about the hyper-stylized images of *The White Ribbon*. The camera often hugs unnervingly close behind the backs of its figures and at odd angles, reminiscent of a long modernist tradition of aesthetic "awkwardness" from Cocteau to Antonioni. Moreover, with the spectacular exception of the opening shot of the doctor's fall, we are consistently denied visual access to key moments and events (violent or otherwise) that have either happened just before, or take place just off-screen, or are simply cut short before they reach their culmination. Indeed, like much of Haneke's television work, such as his black-and-white version of Kafka's *The Castle* (1997), *The White Ribbon* refrains from the physical aggression of his recent films.<sup>3</sup> Instead, the cinematic frame would appear now merely to duplicate the recurring leit-motifs of entrapment—framed windows, doorways, hidden recesses, birdcages—in a literal mise-en-abyme. In fact, both interiors and landscapes are shot to look unnaturally static, the human drama unfolding in an eerily frozen, silent, almost embalmed universe underscored by the narrator's deadpan delivery. The claustrophobic, curtained interiors seem undisturbed by human disorder. Obscurity and invisibility subtend the frame, at times taking the form of a white void perceptible through the locked doors and windows in the middle far-distance, as if part of a stage set. Just as the film itself opens with a fade-in from silent black and closes with a fade-out into the same, so, too, the char-

acters move out of the shadows into visibility only to return inexorably into the gloom.

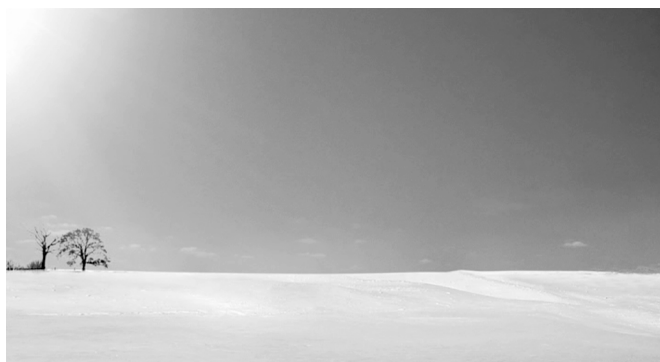
What results, paradoxically, is a flattening out of visual contrast and subdued chiaroscuro such that the image becomes progressively more gray and matt, monotonous and uniform, almost generic, like the deliberately frontal presentation of children with their hard, unforgiving expressions. For although punctiliously realistic in design, the film's ultimate effect is strangely synthetic, betraying an elaborate process of digital post-production.<sup>4</sup> The lugubrious interiors and corridors may evoke Vermeer but they lack real depth of field. Similarly, the exterior, tableau-like images present an increasingly abstract background, whether of trees or fields of crops, such that details are lost. For instance, a series of three brilliant white and increasingly sublime snowscapes in quick succession is gradually emptied of form, the horizon broken only by the profile of two skeletal trees. In the case of the funeral procession for the farmer, a significant detail—the identity of the figure refusing to shake the hand of the eldest son who joins the procession in the distance—becomes a matter of pure guesswork.

Indeed, as the film records the after-effects of each malicious act, its taut, spectral canvases, Dürer-like in their glacial, clinical dissection of reality, take on a melancholic pallor as if sucked of their very lifeblood. This produces odd, enigmatic inserts such as a window frame reflected ethereally onto a wall in slanted silhouette seconds before the cataclysmic barn fire. The sense that beauty is doomed here is directly articulated by the doctor who, after having been surprised by his young son Rudi in a compromising position with his fourteen-year-old daughter Anna, explains matter-of-factly in what is one of the film's most unsettling phrases: "You have to suffer for beauty—isn't that what they say?" Unsurprisingly, it is that most pretty of domestic birds, a parakeet, born to sing and chirp, that is spreadeagled by scissors in a gesture of revenge by the pastor's daughter. The final composed tableau of the villagers gathering in church after war has been declared—a photographic elegy for the soon-to-be-slaughtered preceded by a series of three progressively long shots of the village church presided over by oppressive clouds—presents one last flattening out of the visual. By taking his place in a pew with the rest of the congregation, the pastor, who had literally battened down all the hatches when confronted by the schoolteacher, is firmly reduced to the same level of collective responsibility and guilt as his parishioners.

But this is only half the story, of course. For the kind of aesthetic depth associated with Haneke's intensive work on the grain and texture of the digital/analogue image in films like *Caché* has effectively been displaced to the soundtrack,



## AWKWARD ANGLES, HAUNTED LANDSCAPES



*The White Ribbon*. © 2009 X Filme Creative Pool, Wega Film, Les Films du Losange, Lucky Red, ARD Degeto, Bayerischer Rundfunk, Österreichischer Rundfunk Fernsehen, France 3 Cinéma. DVD: Artificial Eye (U.K.).

which resensitizes us to the full potential of sound, pitch, and volume. With the image increasingly reduced to a hollow surface, it records even more starkly, like an echo chamber, not only the rustling wind and hum of flies (sole markers of nature here) and the noises of everyday suffering like a baby crying, but also the piercing tones of persecution, the nuances of cruelty and hypocrisy, the intimations of potential violence taking place just off-screen, and the deafening silence of repression. Indeed, the viewer is formally positioned in a dialectics of sound and image to “hear” the raw, acoustic damage unleashed by the agents of violence who wish to “see” the sins of the father visited directly on other children and adults.

Hence, we may see almost nothing of the tortured body of Sigi (Fion Mutert) lying in the middle distance, but we hear in ear-splitting intensity the crockery that Rudi smashes to the ground off-screen after realizing that his sister and father had lied to him about his mother’s disappearance. In the case of the scene between the steward (Josef Bierbichler) and his eldest son Georg (Enno Trebs), who stole Sigi’s whistle, we witness the gesture of the father about to mete out punishment, yet the beating itself is unseen. What follows—the son openly defying his father by blowing the whistle and thus provoking further beating off-screen—suggests again the extent to which the terror of *The White Ribbon* is sonically expressed. For this reason, fear and dread operate on an arguably more internal and psychological level for the viewer.

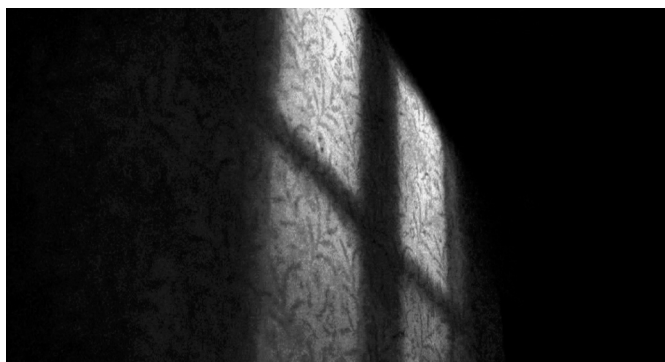
The film’s magnified, auditory *hors-champ* captures to blistering effect the diction of patriarchal speech act and the manipulation of language, to the point that almost every line of dialogue has the force of a command or damning interrogation. Particularly shocking are the levels of (self-)disgust reached verbally in one scene between the doctor and the midwife which ends with his demand: “Why don’t you just die!” The reason for Klara (Maria-Victoria Dragus) suddenly fainting in the classroom, if not itself a ruse, is the humiliating diatribe directed against her exposed back by her intemperate father (he had minutes before dragged her by the ear to the back wall). It is surely significant, too, that Anna explains her activity with her father in aural terms, remarking to Rudi that she is having her earlobe repunctured in order to wear her dead mother’s earrings. One of the most alarming images is that of Karli’s battered eyes after his attack, yet even this is surpassed in horror by his agonizing attempt afterward to shout something (the identity of his attacker(s) perhaps?) while the doctor wraps his face in a bandage and all but smothers him. At this point in Haneke’s project, sound, rather than the image, insists on the essential reality of violence: pain inflicted upon another.

## THE ABERRATIONS OF MONTAGE

*The White Ribbon* presents thus a fascinating tension between sound and image, one that breaks down essentially into an opposition between the film and its narrator. This applies even during those rare moments when the narrator does not describe what we are seeing. One such instance occurs just before the beatings of Klara and Martin (Leonard Proxauf) by their father for returning home late. We are confronted with the symbolic closed door of the dining room in the far center of the frame and wait for the pastor to carry out the gruesome punishment. Except this does not happen. Instead, Martin comes out through the door and into the middle foreground of the frame. We then follow him as he collects the cane from a side room and steps in and out of frame as the camera loops around the corridor in what seems a slow and distended 360-degree turn. There is a hyperbolic false-ness to this circular movement, as if this scene, which the narrator could never have witnessed, were a product of speculative overdrive on his part designed to show symbolically that the increasingly recalcitrant children are sealing their own fate.

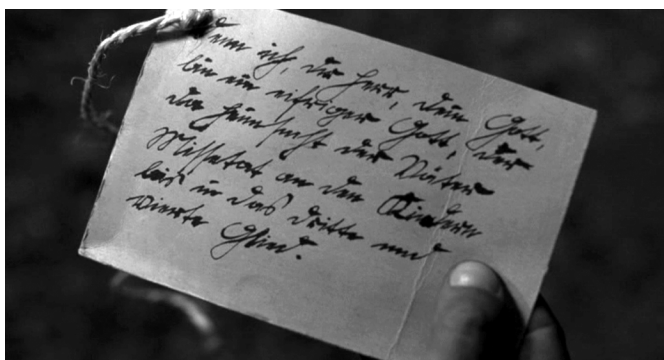
In fact, all the extended, uninterrupted sequences in the film are codified in terms of the narrator’s free-flowing desire or invention, beginning with his enraptured dancing with Eva at the harvest festival pictured in repeated 360-degree turns. An equally disorienting sequence is when the narrator shows how he scrupulously respected the wishes and honor of Eva while on a picnic trip. During a long, continuous take in the form of a backward-tracking shot, he first steers the carriage right and then draws it to a halt before turning toward her, an act she construes as a sexual advance and politely declines. He appears perplexed and orders the horse to move on, promising to turn back. But he continues in the same direction. She then motions for him to stop so that she can plant a tender kiss on his open lips. The implicit message here is that she is the initiator of desire, the active Eve to his passive Adam. Yet such a coy arc of visual excess, where time appears arrested and realism veers into the realm of personal myth, reads like a possible distortion of the truth. No resolution is provided, obliging us to view this and every slightest hint of inconsistency, however charming, as the narrator’s desire to lead the viewer up the garden path. Hence our lingering doubts when the teacher suddenly offers to play the piano for Eva after she turns up at his door one night after being sacked by the baron. Music, the narrator would want us to believe, does not have to be either merely technique or a means of moral indoctrination, but can also provide immediate balm and respectful intimacy.

## REVELATION, TRAUMA, REPRESSION



*The White Ribbon.* © 2009 X Filme Creative Pool, Wega Film, Les Films du Losange, Lucky Red, ARD Degeto, Bayerischer Rundfunk, Österreichischer Rundfunk Fernsehen, France 3 Cinéma. DVD: Artificial Eye (U.K.).





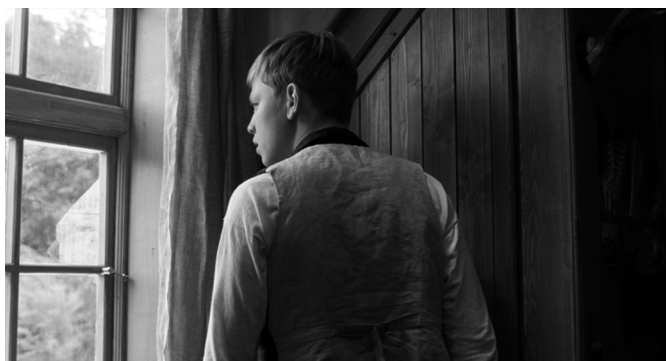
#### Visions of death and retribution in an empty world

*The White Ribbon*. © 2009 X Filme Creative Pool, Wega Film, Les Films du Losange, Lucky Red, ARD Degeto, Bayerischer Rundfunk, Österreichischer Rundfunk Fernsehen, France 3 Cinéma. DVD: Artificial Eye (U.K.).

The flagrant absence of editing in these cases is matched by those other moments in the film where the edit imposes itself explicitly and deliberately. I am thinking not only of those teasing moments of suspended action, as when we track the farmer's daughter, Frieda (Birgit Minichmayr), running anxiously through the village but are forced to wait until after the intercut caged-bird sequence between the pastor and his youngest son to discover where she is heading (a meeting with her assembled family). Far more problematic, yet also more potent, are those instances of formal disturbance and friction (or "aberration," to use the pastor's word describing the schoolmaster's "monstrous" accusation against his children) when the cut of montage is highlighted, lifting the film to a higher critical level and a reflection on violence. For example, the scene of the pastor berating Martin for masturbation and mercilessly reducing him to tears ("Be sincere!") is abruptly cut to a long shot of two indiscernible figures in the far background photographed from behind. We hear the brute sounds of sexual grunting and orgasm before the identities of the doctor and the midwife are revealed in a slow zoom. We are obliged by this temporarily confusing and provocative edit, where just for a second we are invited to imagine the worst, to consider precisely the links between different

kinds of violent act (verbal, physical, mental) and their far-reaching implications.

Perhaps the most striking edit of all occurs when the film's underlying theme is spelt out overtly. From the scene of confirmation in the church, where the pastor hesitates before inserting the holy wine into his dejected daughter Klara mouth with the incantatory words, "This is the blood of the New Testament, shed for you for the forgiveness of sins," we pass suddenly, and without commentary, to the moment when Karli's tortured body is found in the undergrowth with a handwritten note attached. It is a passage from the Bible about the sins of the father being visited on the children to the third and fourth generation. The Christian message has been taken literally to grotesque ends. As we attempt to read the message conveyed in close-up, we also hear it being read aloud verbatim on the soundtrack. But, in another remarkable aberration, the voice is not the narrator's. Although we assume it to belong to one of the unidentified villagers who have found the boy, the speaker remains unseen, and, within seconds, the scene is peremptorily cut. In this series of quick-fire edits, which again draws directly on our imaginative faculties, the voice and authority of both the bullying pastor and the narrator have been supplanted by the hostile forces of the



Georg's defiance

The White Ribbon. © 2009 X Filme Creative Pool, Wega Film, Les Films du Losange, Lucky Red, ARD Degeto, Bayerischer Rundfunk, Österreichischer Rundfunk Fernsehen, France 3 Cinéma. DVD: Artificial Eye (U.K.).

unknown, opening up an ontological void in the narration equivalent to those moments of rupture we have experienced on the visual level.

Such calculated jolts of montage, whereby the film's surface is subjected to unexpected abrasions and the willed accidents of ironic juxtaposition, serve not only to transform the games of violence (including with the viewer) previously formulated in Haneke's cinema in primarily visual terms (the editor here is Monika Willi, who also worked on *The Piano Teacher* and 2007's *Funny Games U.S.*). More crucially, they also deflate and unbind, like threads of ribbon, the overdetermining, narcissistic master-narrative of the narrator whose neat allegorical frame, sealed at the end by the deadly church tableau, is exposed and decisively undermined by the intensive interplay of sound and image. This type of formal undercutting is, in fact, already announced in the opening credit sequence where, in total silence, and immediately below the main electronically formatted title, the subtitle "A German Children's Story" (left deliberately untranslated in all international versions of the film), comes gently into being on the screen, white on black, in the cursive form of Old German script. Rather than simply representing and replicating the stifling rigidity that breeds anonymous violence and unresolved fear, the film actively employs the always unique, disjunctive process of montage, so resisting the cycle of ritualized punishment and logic of doom.

It could even be argued that such a practice of montage not only throws into sharp relief but also extends the acts of disobedience by those disturbed children like Georg who, with their occasionally monstrous behavior, are struggling to find a voice with which to refuse the warped moral system into which they have been born. The film is not asking us to condone such acts but rather to understand that

they represent perhaps the only means of individual expression and freedom available in such a repressive and collectively defined culture. Certainly, by privileging discordance and inconsistency, *The White Ribbon* confutes any teleological search for originary innocence or absolute truth—which, as we are made abundantly aware, causes only harm. In so doing, and despite initial impressions, the film ultimately divests itself of any claim to mastery or perfection, allowing us instead to view such delicate material objects as white ribbons not as symbolic marks of either purity or shame, but rather as manifestations of cinematic beauty in their own right, released from the internalized knots of repression and the perverted rhetoric of noble suffering. The film's complex beauty can thus be read as a form of resistance to absolutism and the order represented both by narrative and brutalizing morality. *The White Ribbon* is Haneke's most profound and challenging film yet.

1. The theme of ills being passed down from generation to generation propelled Haneke's much earlier *Lemmings* (1979), a feature-length television drama about his own generation that came of age in Austria after World War II and was formed by a morally rigid and punitive family regime. Part 1 ("Arcadia") concerns the sins of the fathers and mothers, part 2 ("Injuries") the harm caused by the parents' sexual repression and inability to express emotion, making them incapable of offering any effective guidance or vision to their own children.

2. Erika explicitly cites Adorno who wrote of Schubert's song cycles in terms that could just as easily be applied to the viewer's experience of *The White Ribbon*. For Adorno in "Schubert" (1928), the song cycles: "link up with poems in which again and again the images of death present themselves to the man who wanders among them as diminutively as Schubert in the *Dreimäderlhaus*. A stream, a mill and a dark desolate wintry landscape stretching away in the twilight of mock suns, timeless, as in a dream—these are hallmarks of the setting of Schubert's songs, with dried flowers for their monumental ornament."

3. Haneke explains in an interview featured on the 2010 Artificial Eye DVD edition of *The White Ribbon* that the film was, in fact, conceived at one point as a television film in three parts. Eventually he decided on a three-hour film for the cinema which, for commercial reasons, was reduced by almost forty minutes with the aid of veteran scriptwriter Jean-Claude Carrière.

4. According to Haneke in an interview with Michel Cieutat and Philippe Rouyer in *Positif* 584 (October 2009), 14–21, the film was initially shot in natural light on 35mm in color, then transferred to digital intermediate for extensive processing (including over sixty special effects), before being retransferred to 35 mm black-and-white for commercial release.

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**ABSTRACT** This essay analyzes Michael Haneke's new film *The White Ribbon* (2009), focusing on its exceptional plastic qualities and intensive use of sound. It is argued that an ironic, disjunctive practice of montage exposes and resists the narrative of ritualized punishment, thereby transforming the "games" of violence previously rendered in Haneke's cinema in primarily visual terms.

**KEYWORDS** Haneke, *The White Ribbon*, screen violence, film sound, montage

**CREDITS** *Das weisse Band: Eine deutsche Kindergeschichte*. Director, writer: Michael Haneke. Producers: Stefan Arndt, Veit Heiduschka, Michael Katz, Margaret Ménégoz, Andrea Occhipinti. Cinematographer: Christian Berger. Editor: Monika Willi. ©2009 X Filme Creative Pool, Wega Film, Les Films du Losange, Lucky Red, ARD Degeto, Bayerischer Rundfunk, Österreichischer Rundfunk Fernsehen, France 3 Cinéma.